

NEWSLETTER

News and updates about sage-grouse conservation in Idaho

Summer 2008

Quarterly Update



STATUS REVIEW FOR GREATER SAGE-GROUSE UNDER THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

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For the current status review, Idaho Fish and Game provided the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with information about 69 conservation efforts in Idaho. Most of these conservation efforts were LWG habitat improvement projects supported by funds from the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation.

On February 26, 2008, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced the initiation of a status review for the Greater Sage-grouse across its range. In January 2005 the Service completed a status review for greater sage-grouse and determined that the species did not meet the Service's definition of threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and therefore listing was not warranted. The Service's decision was challenged and in December 2007 a Federal judge remanded the decision back to the Service for additional review. Based on statutory timeframes associated with a 12-month status review, the Service intends to complete its review for greater sage-grouse in December 2008. This status review will consider the status of all populations of greater sage-grouse across the species' range, including 11 western states and 2 Canadian provinces.

The ESA regulations set out a specific process for assessing whether species warrant listing or not. When the Service receives a petition to list a species or a portion of a species' range, the Service must make a determination within 90 days on whether the petition contains substantial information. If the petition contains substantial information, the Service will proceed with a 12-month status review. The possible outcomes

of a 12-month status review are as follows.

- Listing is warranted (associated proposed rule to list the species as threatened or endangered is usually issued at this time);
- Listing is not warranted (process ends); or
- Listing is warranted but precluded by other higher priority listing actions. Under this scenario the species becomes a candidate for listing under the ESA.

When the Service conducts a status review they must consider the 5 listing factors to determine whether the species meets the definition of threatened or endangered. These 5 factors include the following.

- The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of habitat or range;
- Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes;
- Disease or predation;
- Inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and
- Other natural or man-made factors affecting the species survival.

In addition to the 5 factors listed above, the Service considers proposed and ongoing conservation measures that may alleviate these threat factors through the Policy for

the Evaluation of Conservation Efforts. The Service may also determine that the species is warranted for listing in some portions of the range, but not in all portions and make associated proposed listing determinations.

On June 27, 2008, the public information collection period for the status review closed. As part of the information collection period, inter-agency teams across the range worked closely with the Service to assimilate data and information about conservation efforts and development actions across the range. In Idaho, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game led a team to collect information and provide as complete a picture of sage-grouse conservation in the state as possible. The Service will now be aggregating existing information and conducting in-depth analyses on the components driving ecological systems across the range of sage-grouse such as fire, invasive species, energy development, taxonomy, climate change, grazing, and others. In August 2008 the Service is scheduled to provide an update to the Federal judge regarding progress on the status review and the availability of new scientific information for consideration. We anticipate that Service biologists will provide a status recommendation for greater sage-grouse to Service managers this coming fall.

LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES

One of our SAC members, Dan Gossett, will be leaving his position as Sage-grouse Project Manager for the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes. Dan is moving to Colorado to be with his family. Dan has made significant contributions to the SAC and the development of the State Plan. He has dramatically improved the knowledge and management of sage-grouse on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation through several key studies including lek surveys and monitoring sage-grouse movements, ecology, and West Nile virus. He has also helped the Tribes develop a sage-grouse management plan for their lands.

We will miss Dan's dry humor and scientific knowledge, but we wish him the best!



BIG DESERT

Sam Chandler and Rochelle Oxarango will represent the Local Working Group on the SAC, by attending SAC meetings and helping to disseminate information. The Local

Working Group has completed the conservation measures for their LWG plan and they are ready for review. Although the plan is making significant progress, they do

not expect it to be completed until the end of the year.

CHALLIS

The group had a full and productive meeting in June. They discussed several items including 1) a review of the April SAC meeting by Vince Guyer; 2) the boundary between the

Challis and Upper Snake sage-grouse planning areas; 3) 2008 hunting regulations; 4) an update on the current OSC projects; 5) a review of the 2008 OSC project propos-

als; and 6) an update on priority habitat restoration areas. The group's next meeting is scheduled for December 2008.

EAST IDAHO UPLANDS

The group continues to meet about once a month and is making significant progress on their Sage-grouse Conservation Plan. They are currently working on conservation measures, particularly in relation to livestock grazing.

The group agreed that grazing practices can have both positive and negative impacts on sage-grouse. The group had been meeting at two different locations and communicating on a conference call, but they decided to meet in person at

Lava Hot Springs as they work through some difficult issues. One of the groups most significant challenges is lack of information on sage-grouse in the planning area.

GREATER CURLEW VALLEY

The Curlew LWG had a very informative field trip with Dr. Alma Winward, a sagebrush ecologist. Dr. Winward mapped the vegetation community on the Curlew National

Grassland several years ago. Unfortunately, there has been several fires since then. The Forest Service is now working with Dr. Terry Booth, a Range-land Scientist, to map the

current habitat. Dr. Booth uses high-resolution aerial photography to map the vegetation

JARBIDGE

The Jarbidge Local Working Group met on June 19, 2008 after a brief hiatus since finalizing their conservation plan in October 2007. The group has several new members, including a new IDFG coordinator, Brad Lowe, and a new facilitator, Mike Pepper, from KMP Planning. At the meeting, the group agreed to a new, more formal operating structure and ground rules that will more effectively sup-

port their efforts and respect positive participation. The group agreed to develop a charter and require members to sign and agree to the terms, as a condition of membership. In addition to operating issues, the group agreed to take steps to broaden its membership and will invite new participation beginning with the next meeting in July. Everyone at the meeting was

positive about the group's efforts and is anxious to begin development on new projects as soon as possible. The July meeting is tentatively scheduled for Thursday, July 17th from 7 to 9 p.m. at IDFG in Jerome. The meeting will focus on establishing focus areas, setting specific objectives for the next year, and identifying new projects.

LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES, CONTINUED.

MOUNTAIN HOME

This group has not yet been formed

NORTH MAGIC VALLEY

The North Magic Valley LWG is submitting two sage-grouse projects for OSC funding. One project, titled Square Lake Fence, is sponsored by the Wood River Land Trust. The Land Trust purchased the 320-acre Square Lake Property in 2004 to protect sage-grouse habitat, including an active lek. If approved, OSC project funds (in concert with matching funds) would be used to install wildlife-

friendly fences around the property to control cattle grazing and improve sensitive wildlife habitat. The second project is sponsored by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. IDFG plans to recruit and train volunteers to survey leks throughout the North Magic Valley, South Magic Valley, Shoshone Basin and Jarbidge Local Working Group areas during Spring 2009. This project would

provide funding to reimburse these volunteers for gas and mileage for personal vehicle use associated with the lek surveys. North Magic Valley LWG participants are continuing meeting monthly to develop their conservation plan. The next meeting is July 22 in Shoshone.



OWYHEE

The Owyhee LWG has formed a scientific committee, who will be evaluating previous

habitat restoration projects in their area. Their goal is to publish the results, so every-

one can learn from these projects.

SHOSHONE BASIN

The Shoshone Basin LWG technical committee met this winter and discussed how to finalize their plan. BLM is completing computer work on the sagebrush mapping project. Current sagebrush density levels that resulted from

this project will be included in the final LWG plan. A new riparian enclosure has been planned and will be funded by the Habitat Improvement Program. A contractor has been selected and work will begin soon. This 20-acre

enclosure is on private land and will protect a key water source, including a perennial pond and an intermittent stream. This project will benefit waterfowl, deer, antelope, and sage-grouse.

SOUTH MAGIC VALLEY

The South Magic Valley LWG met on June 11, 2008. Justin Barrett is the IDFG Coordinator and current membership includes representation from the BLM, USFS and the IDFG. Mike Pepper from KMP Planning will assist the group as the facilitator. The emphasis for the meeting was to discuss options for structure and potential direction for the group. The group also developed a plan to expand membership to include private landowners and permittees, along with representatives from key stakeholder interests such as local sports-

men's groups, local land trusts, the Audubon Society, other interested and affected agencies, and area residents. The group is committed to moving forward as quickly as possible into project development. Development of an overall conservation plan is important and plan development will focus on priority areas where habitat projects have a high probability of success. To broaden public awareness to the sage-grouse situation and invite participation and membership in the LWG, the group has scheduled a public information

meeting for Thursday, July 31, 2008. The meeting will be held at the Burley Best Western Inn at 800 Overland Ave. in Burley from 7 to 9 p.m. Dave Musil, IDFG research biologist, will present an informative program on sage-grouse. For more information on the public meeting or the South Magic Valley Sage Grouse Local Working Group, contact Justin Barrett, IDFG Coordinator at 324-4359 / jbarrett@idfg.idaho.gov or facilitator Mike Pepper, KMP Planning at 734-6208 / kmpplanning@cableone.net

The next SAC meeting is October 7 & 8 in Twin Falls. We will have a full-day field trip to the Murphy Complex Fire and the site of the proposed wind farm on China Mountain/ Brown's Bench.

IDAHO SAGE-GROUSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Visit our website!
<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/grouse/>

LWG UPDATES, CONTINUED.

UPPER SNAKE

The Upper Snake LWG is actively seeking two new members for their Executive Committee. The group met in June primarily to discuss OSC project proposals that were due July 1. They also plan on meeting soon with members from the Challis LWG to dis-

cuss the overlap in their boundaries. There are also some boundary issues with the Big Desert LWG. All members of the Upper Snake group agree that it makes more sense for the Big Desert group to cover the ground between Highway 26 and

Highway 20. The group will miss one of their members, Rob Larrañaga, who is leaving the Camas National Wildlife Refuge for a new position in New Mexico in early July.

WEST CENTRAL

The West-Central Local Working Group will host its annual summer barbecue on Wednesday, July 16th, at 6:00 p.m. in Midvale. The event began three years ago as part of the LWG's outreach and education effort. The public is invited, along with local county commissioners and members of county planning and zoning boards, to keep them apprised of threats to sage-grouse, such as infrastructure and human disturbance. The West-Central

group continues to focus on its three top priorities: finishing its conservation plan, in the form of a programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances; continuing the telemetry study; and completing some Lawson aerator projects to improve sage-grouse habitat. Joe Hinson and Kendra Womack have been leading the way in making final adjustments to the CCAA, which should be ready for submission to USFWS before sum-

mer's end. Gene Gray and volunteers plan to trap additional hens late this summer to enable us to gather more nesting and brooding data next spring. And Royce Schwenkfelder has submitted a proposal for OSC funding to improve three plots of decadent brush on his property this fall, followed by intensive monitoring. Thanks to Ron Brooks in the Weiser office of NRCS for his help on this project.



2008 SAGE-GROUSE HUNTING SEASONS BY TOM HEMKER

Traditionally, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game Commission has determined the sage-grouse hunting seasons at the same time as other upland gamebird species. This is usually done in the spring, before IDFG biologists have had sufficient time to gather and analyze spring lek counts. This year, however, the Commission will set the 2008 sage-grouse season during their August meeting. Also for the first time, IDFG will use existing data to guide 2008 sage-grouse season recommendations using the season-setting protocol established in the 2006 Idaho Sage-grouse Plan (page 4-122). IDFG regional biologists

will also seek input from LWGs in June and July. Each region will provide me with their recommendations. I will then work with the IDFG Director's Office to develop the Department's 2008 season recommendations and provide them to the Commission at their meeting on July 24. After a public input period, the Commission will consider all input received and set the 2008 sage-grouse seasons during their August conference call. As always, if a major West Nile virus outbreak or wildfire occurs, the IDFG Director can declare an emergency season closure anytime.

